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Writing the *Real* Persuasion

Patricia Grabill

Scientists could do most preliminary research using alternatives, then do their final studies on animals.

Letter to the editor
Erin Shutty

A woman should not have the choice to terminate a potential human life. . . . If this had been practiced in the past, there may not have been an Abraham Lincoln or a Harriet Tubman.

Letter to Senator Dan Coats
Jeff Goetz

Every election year there are many politicians who base their campaign on the federal or state budgets—how they are going to cut spending or how they will cut the national deficit—yet every year our national debt grows larger.

Teen column in newspaper
Sarah Beaver

Soon after making this announcement [that he had acquired the HIV virus], Johnson pleaded for Americans to become comfortable with practicing safe sex. However, he has changed his tune and now stresses that abstinence is the only true form of protection.

Letter to the editor
Nate Hubartt

Having read in many publications—including, of course, the *English Journal*—that many students are unable to write past their own experiences, I decided to design a writing assignment that would move my students from personal description and narration to persuasion. I did the assignment with two of my English classes, high-school sophomores in honors English. In fact, most of the students in the class were average to very good English students who were willing writers.

Since I have been working with high-school students for many years, I know that they are passionate about many things besides each other. They have beliefs and values and ideals. I asked

them to choose a subject or idea about which they were passionate, something they would change if they could. They were instructed to pick a controversial issue about which people were likely to disagree and present a clearly stated argument with a specific audience in mind. I sent them to the library to garner information on the subject. They would have to have a minimum of three sources of information including laws (if there were any), statistics, and expert opinion. They were to begin with a statement of belief and, using the information they found in their research, argue for the position they had stated. The end of the paper would be a call for action or a recommendation for a specific solution.

I had two classes of sophomores with a total of thirty-seven students. The issues they chose to write about were, in general, fairly predictable, but there were some surprises. Seven students wrote about abortion—six were absolutely against it, and the seventh believed that choice and abortion were two different issues and argued for the separation of issues. Two students wrote about sex education and AIDS prevention—a hot topic in our school corporation. One student supported giving extensive information to students, and one supported the position of our local school board, which is to teach only abstinence as a means of preventing AIDS. Eight students wrote about drunk-driving laws and the fact that courts are often lenient toward drunk drivers. All eight argued for stricter laws and jail time for drunk drivers. Three athletes wrote about the need to text for steroids among high-school athletes. Two students, concerned about welfare adoption practices in our county, wrote about biracial adoptions and the need to place minority children in the best homes possible, regardless of the color of the adoptive parents. Five students concerned about the environment wrote about animal poaching,

recycling, the preservation of the Brazilian rain forest, needless cosmetic testing on animals, the dangers of air and water pollution. Three students wrote papers about the dangers of censorship, warning against the erosion of our individual freedoms. One student, concerned about the Presidential election, wrote a paper espousing the belief that only Bill Clinton could clean up the budget mess in Washington. One student, disagreeing with a school-board decision to fill our school with sixth graders, wrote a paper about the dangers of overcrowding at school. Three students saw our court system as corrupt because judges do not keep serious offenders in prison to serve their full terms. Finally, one student wrote about an issue of local importance to him—the injustice of teachers stereotyping students by the length of their hair.

I gave them no specific page length for the paper, but I did tell them that they probably could not cover the topic sufficiently in one page. Most of the papers turned in to me were from two to four double-spaced pages long. All were word processed because we do our writing on computers.

After the papers were written, the fun began. I believe that the purpose of persuasive writing in a democratic society is to use it to get in touch with people who can make a difference. The best persuasion is written in letters. Politicians *do* read their mail. Letters to the editor *do* get published. Therefore, I gave the assignment a second part: to rewrite the paper, this time as a business letter of no more than one page. They would have to focus on the issue, choose a specific person as an audience, and ask for action and a response. I sent them back to the library for names and addresses. I told them that a response to their letter was worth extra credit points for the last nine weeks' grading period. With this promise they really went to work.

The letters on the abortion issue went to our local state senators and our US Senator. The letters about testing for steroids were sent to the Indiana High School Athletic Association. The letter about the Brazilian rain forest was sent to the Brazilian ambassador in Washington, DC. Thirteen students sent their letters to a county newspaper. The letters espousing biracial adoption were sent to the county department of children and family services. All the students found an audience for their letters, and the school paid the postage.

Several students told me that they did not expect a response because no one cared what they thought. They were not old enough to vote, they did not have any money, and they did not have any prestige. I was more optimistic than they. I believe that people who write well have power, and I told them that. I wanted them to discover the power that exists in their own writing.

The response was overwhelming. Of the thirty-seven students who wrote letters, only seven of them received no response. Even the office of the Brazilian ambassador answered the letter sent to him. Every letter sent to the newspaper was published. In fact, one editorial page editor was so impressed that he ran one letter—the one supporting our school board's decision to teach abstinence as the primary means of preventing AIDS—as a special guest editorial. The student had to go to the newspaper to have his picture taken to run with the column. The director of the county department of children and family services came to our school and presented information about biracial adoption to the family-living class; the students who wrote to her attended her presentation. The student who wrote about long hair and stereotyping by teachers sent his letter to the school newspaper where it was printed on the editorial page. I was pleased by the response; the students were surprised.

From this assignment, students learned to find facts and expert opinion to support what was for them an emotional issue. They also learned to write an effective business letter. We expanded on the format many of them had learned in keyboarding class. It is not easy to take a two- to four-page paper and edit it to produce a one-page business letter, but many people—politicians, newspaper editors, and the like—do not have time for lengthy letters. The students had to cut to the bare bones of the issue; they learned to do that after long discussion about what needed to stay and what was expendable.

I assigned this writing project early in March, and I really discovered its impact in May as we were preparing to end the school year. On the first day of school, I had asked my students to write about themselves as writers. One of the prompts to which they responded was, "Write about any successes you have had as a writer." On May 28, 1992, I asked them to respond to the same prompts.

My proudest piece of work would probably be my letter to one of our U.S. Senators. I liked it so well because it was on a subject I am really concerned about. It was also neat getting back a response from him.

One piece of writing that I did this year that I felt good about was my persuasive paper on abortion. It gave me a good chance to express the way I feel about the issue. It was my first experience in writing persuasively. I found out that it is a very good way to get the message across. I received a nice response, so I was impressed with the results.

I consider most of the writings I have wrote to be disasters with the exception of my letter. The only reason I half-way like it is because someone responded to it.

I have learned that writing can affect everything. The persuasive letters that we sent out proved that people do read what you write, and they do respond. Writing is a very effective way of communicating. I don't know if I will ever write as a hobby, but I do know that I will write to be *heard!*

My students became powerful this year. They moved from the personal, affective mode of writing to the persuasive, and, in doing so, achieved social interaction. They became involved in active public discourse, which I believe is the *real* persuasive writing.

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